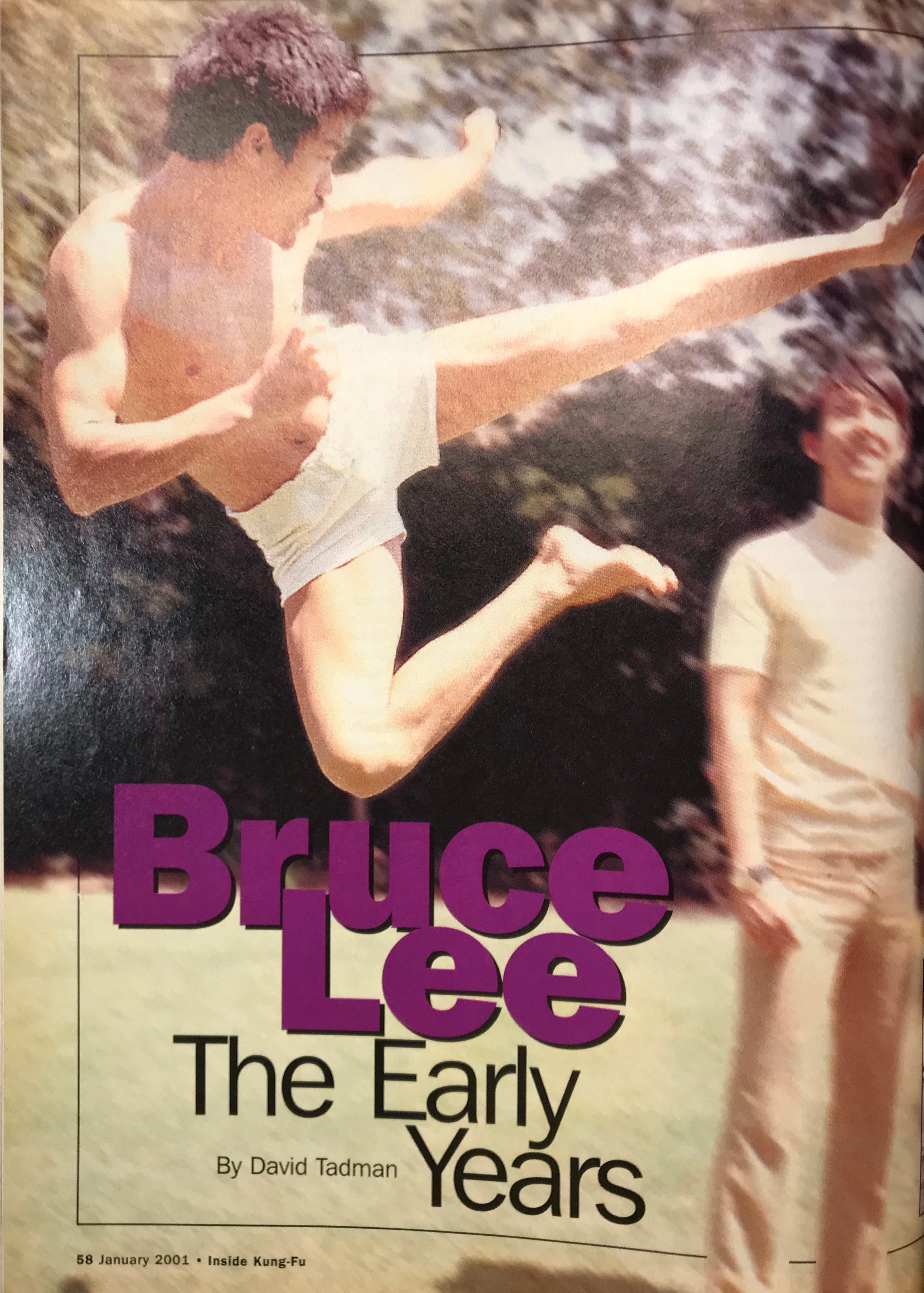




Bruce Lee

The Early Years

By David Tadman

Robert Lee tells the inside story on **Bruce's early years** of tai chi, his rise to **stardom** and what the family thought about **his success.**

The first knight of Hong Kong, the opera performer, the child actor, the rock star. These are just a few of the amazing stories you've heard about Robert Lee. Twenty-seven years after the death of his brother Bruce, there are so few stories to be told. Yet, so few have had the chance to hear Robert Lee's slant on life as a member of the Lee family. This interview will take you from the beginning of Robert's life, through Bruce's death and up to the present day, where the light of his life is his son, Clarence, who bears both an uncanny physical and emotional resemblance to his late uncle.

Photos courtesy of Robert Lee

Robert Lee sings....

**THE BALLAD OF
BRUCE LEE**

INSIDE KUNG-FU: Robert, the Lee family was well-known even before the birth of your brother Bruce. Can you tell us the history of the Lee family?

ROBERT LEE: Yes, my father was one of the top four opera comics in all of Hong Kong. At first there were many struggles, and then later in his career he became very famous. I guess you can say the entertainment blood ran first, through my father's veins. Not too many people know that my mother's uncle was the very first knight of Hong Kong. He was the first "Sir" in Hong Kong to be knighted by the King of England. That meant a lot for our family. My mother's father had 13 wives. Is that notorious enough?

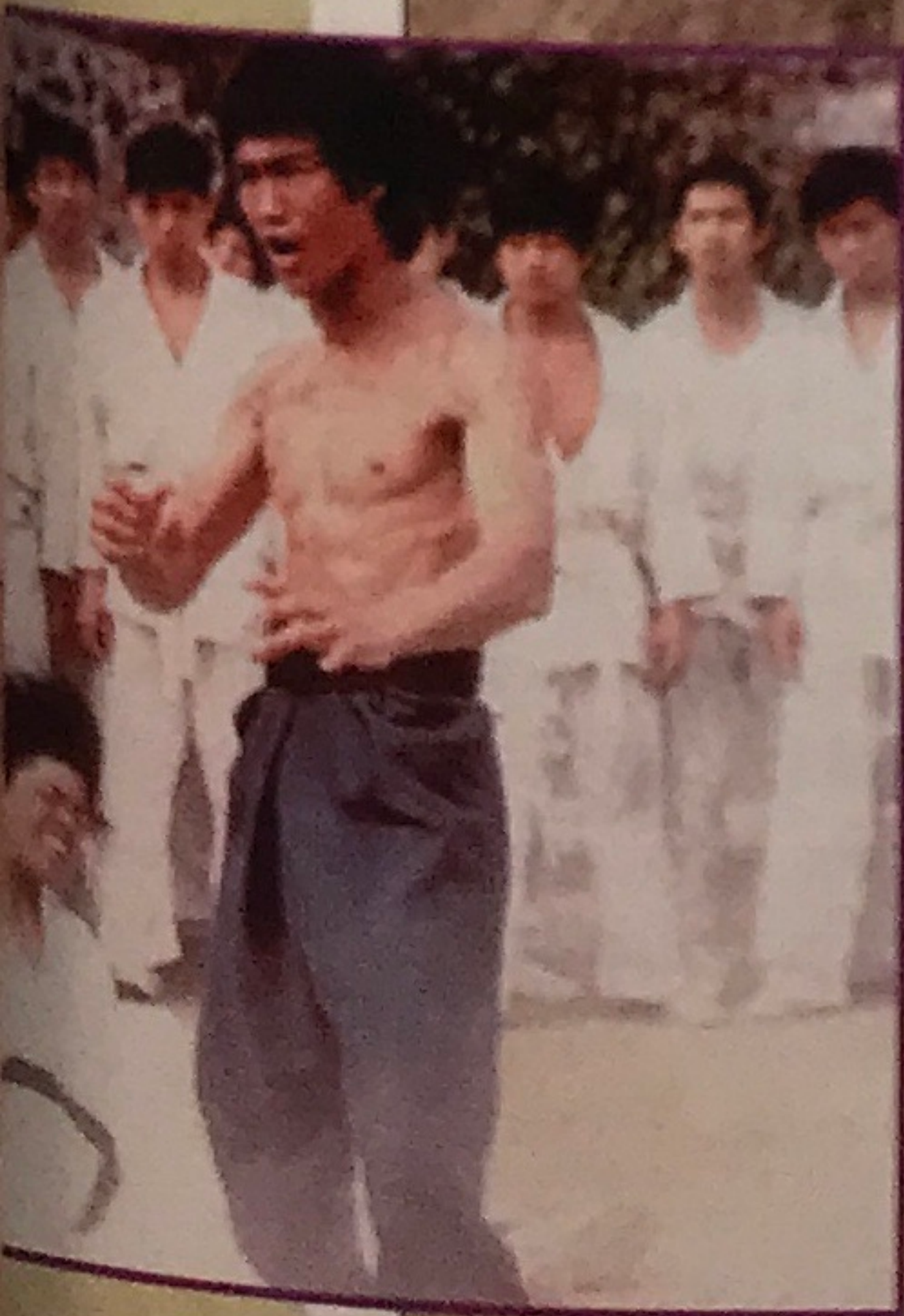
Robert (right) with Bruce and Brandon Lee.

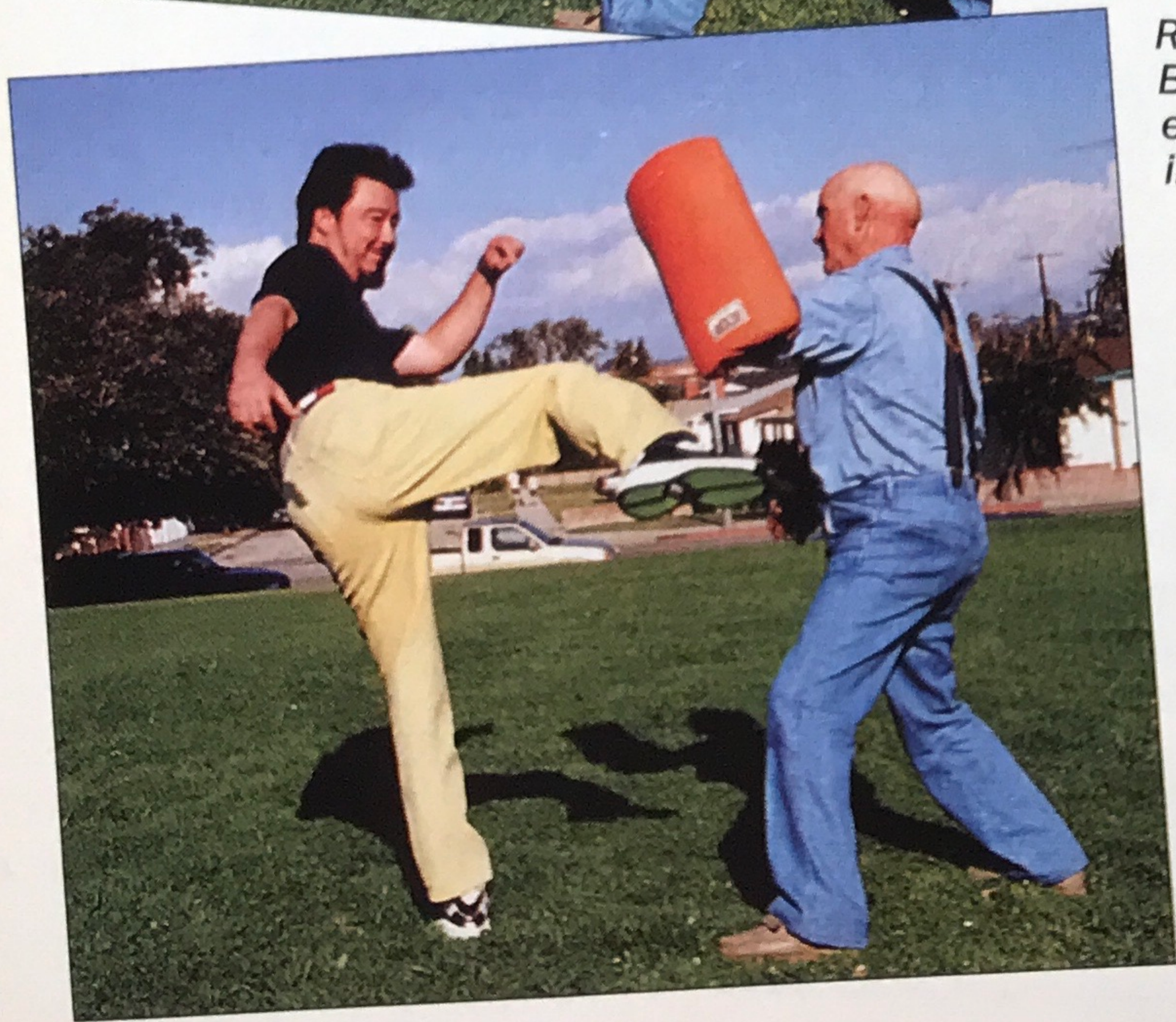
IKF: I know your father trained in tai chi chuan. Did you have any other relatives who trained in the martial arts around the same time as your father?

RL: No I don't believe so. My father started training in tai chi because he was not feeling well. He knew he had to get his body back into shape and tai chi was perfect for that. The older Chinese people believe that tai chi gives the body a holistic workout. It's good for your soul and body. This is the reason for my father training in the art tai chi chuan. The only other family member I can think of who trained in the martial arts would be my cousin Frank. He trained with Bruce in wing chun.

IKF: Was tai chi chuan the only martial art your father studied?

RL: When my father trained with the Opera, he had to go through a lot of rigorous training, which





Robert works with Herb Jackson (left), who helped design some of Bruce Lee's famous workout gear and routines. (Above): In this extremely rare photo, Bruce Lee shows Jim Kelly a move while holding an Enter The Dragon script in his mouth.

involved many of the other arts, different animal systems and many acrobatics. I would say overall, he did study other arts, but mainly tai chi chuan. Looking back at my father's opera career it's similar in what Jackie Chan or Sammo Hung went through. He had to learn stunts, acrobatics, singing, etc.

My father was a well-rounded entertainer.

IKF: Was your father a philosophical man?

RL: My father was a very traditional man and would always come up with certain quotes the older generations used to use. I remember he would always like to use famous quotes from generations past to teach us certain lessons.

IKF: Can you tell us a little bit about your mother and how she raised



Bruce Lee and Chuck Norris choreograph the famous Coliseum fight scene from Return of the Dragon as crew members watch from the sidelines.

you and Bruce along with your other siblings?

RL: Well, my father did most of the raising with the traditional Chinese way, which at times could be very stern. My mother, on the other hand, was mixed Asian and European so she had more Western views on certain situations. Sometimes we would do some very bad things and she would hide them from our father.

IKF: Are there any moments that stand out in your mind when growing up in Hong Kong you would like to share with us.

RL: I used to hang out with my father in his room, and we use to talk about many different things. I was the youngest so my father liked playing around with me and things in that nature. I remember one day my father bought sticks of bamboo, and began to shape them with a knife. About a day or so later, I walked into the house and there was a bow made out of bamboo. That meant a lot to me, just knowing that my father was a very stern and strict man and at the same time, had a soft heart. To this day it is very touching for me.

IKF: We all know that Bruce was a child actor. Does anything stand out about those times?

RL: I was very young at that time, but my mother used to tell us stories about Bruce as a child actor. She would

say that Bruce was a very professional worker on the set. There were times when Bruce was on a break and they would call him back to work, and all of a sudden, he would stand at attention, take his acting directions and be a complete professional. No matter if it was late at night or early in the morning, being tired or bored, he would rise to the occasion and do his job.

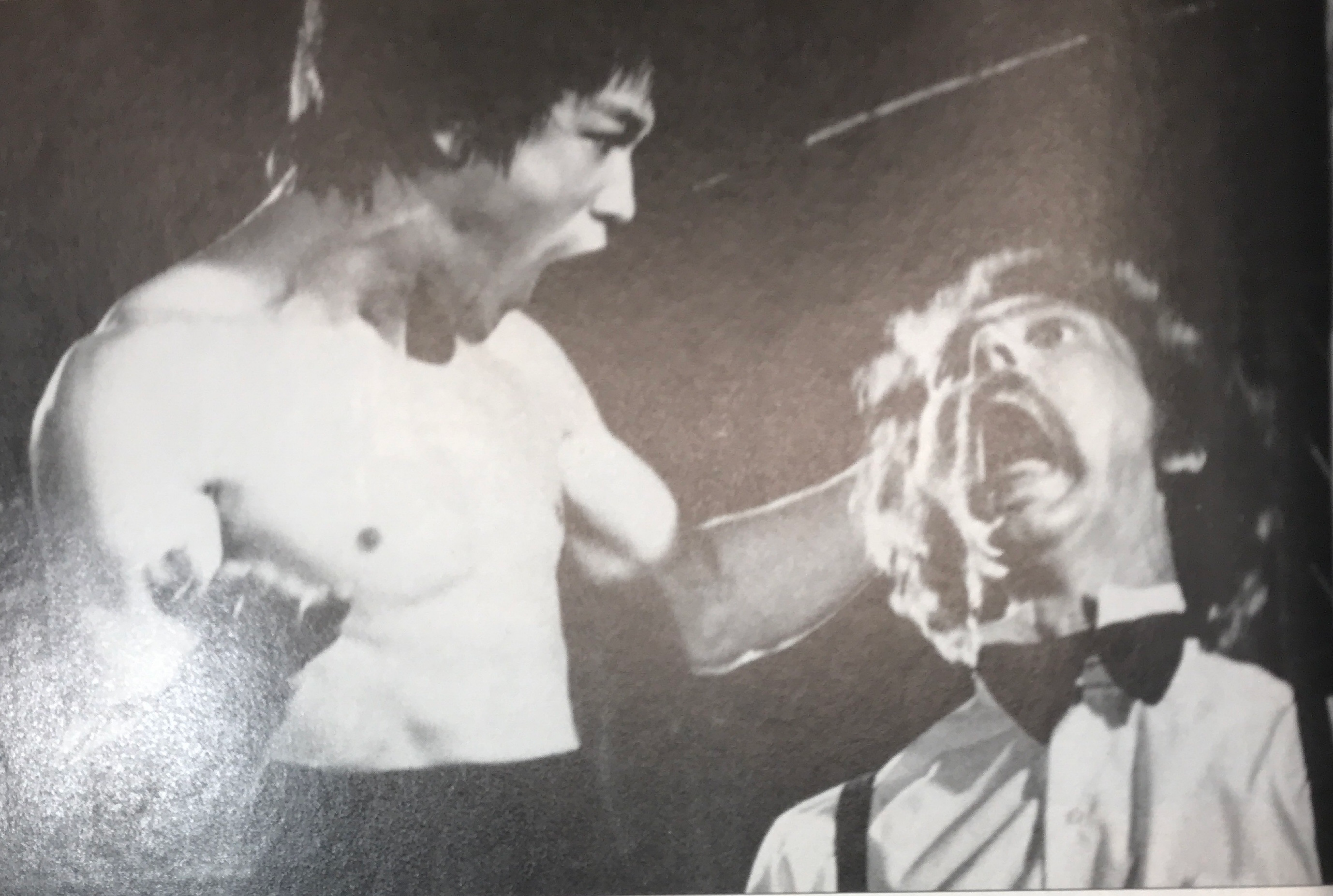
IKF: Did you ever want to pursue an acting career as a child or young adult?

RL: I guess the entertainment blood

runs in our family. My interest has always been music. When I turned around 14 or 15 I had the urge to sing, so I asked my mother if I could have a guitar. I knew if I asked my father he would say, "No way." He believed if it was a Western instrument, it was no good. It meant bad karma. The problem is that I wanted that guitar so badly, I kept asking my mother over and over again without my father's knowledge, and finally she gave in. The only way I could play it was to keep it in the servant's quarters, because I knew my



Bruce Lee uses Golden Harvest's Raymond Chow to frame a scene in Rome.



father would never go in there. I would sit down without an amplifier and learn how to play it by myself. But to answer your question, acting was not my thing.

IKF: Who was your inspiration as a musician at that time?

RL: I really liked Ricky Nelson.

IKF: Before Bruce left for the States, what was your relationship like with him?

RL: Most of the time Bruce would be doing his own thing — either chasing girls or hanging around with friends. As time got closer toward his leaving Hong Kong, he became more somber. I remember one time shortly before Bruce left, we were playing on this huge bed we would frequent in one of the rooms. Anyway we were having fun and playing games and all of the sudden he stopped and looked at me and said, "Well Robert, you know I will be leaving in a couple of days." He looked at me in sadness and walked away. I look back now and realize he was showing me he was going to miss me.

IKF: We all heard how Bruce as a young man would always get into trouble. Is there anything that stands out in your mind from those times?

RL: Well, one day when I was at home I heard a knock at the door. I went to the door and opened it only to

"My mother was very proud of Bruce, as were the rest of us. I can remember watching 'Green Hornet' on television and thinking cool, that's my brother."

find Bruce with his head down looking toward the ground. I remembered a few days earlier I heard Bruce was supposed to fight some guy over a disagreement. As Bruce raised his head, I could see one of his eyes was black and blue. I started to laugh and Bruce said, "If you think this is funny, you should see the other guy, he has no more teeth. My mother rushed him into the maid's quarters and put a boiled egg on his eye. The Chinese people believe if you put an egg over a bruised eye, it will heal quickly, and she wanted to do anything to help the eye heal before my father saw it. Luckily my father never found out about that situation.

IKF: I know your father showed Bruce a little tai chi chuan. Can you tell us anything about those times?

RL: I remember I used to take a lot of pictures of my father training Bruce. As a matter of fact, a lot of those pictures you see in magazines with Bruce and my father training came from my camera. My father also showed me a little tai chi, those are great memories. I also remember taking all the film I shot and going under my staircase at home with a friend of mine and we would be developing the film. The only way we could do it was if we stole our mother's cigarettes and burned them so we can see the image on the negative. When we were done developing, we would leave the closet, choking on smoke. Who would know today that those pictures in a way would be priceless?

IKF: Were there any special outings you took with Bruce and the rest your family before Bruce left for the States?

RL: I'm glad you brought that up. My father used to love fishing, and on most weekends he would rent a boat. We all would drive to the countryside and get on the boat and go fishing and enjoy the day. Bruce did not like to go that often because he would always get seasick. But at the end of the day we would cook the fish and have a great lunch or dinner. Those were great times.

IKF: Can you tell us how Bruce



Robert Lee with his collection of vintage photos of Bruce Lee.



came to meet Yip Man?

RL: When Bruce was about 14 he was a sharp dresser and always liked to flaunt himself to others. Because of this, he started getting into fights and ending up hurt. Bruce decided to learn how to protect himself and was then introduced to Yip Man by our father.

IKF: What was Bruce's relationship like with Yip Man?

RL: Yip Man believed Bruce had a lot of potential, so therefore he showed Bruce a lot of techniques. Some of these techniques were not even shown to the other students. It was great, everytime Bruce learned a new technique he would come home and show myself and my cousin, Frank. At this time Bruce had his own wing chun dummy and he would be practicing everyday.

IKF: Did you see any changes in Bruce's personality as his training grew with Yip Man?

RL: No, not really. He was still very full of himself. He was still kind of showing off a lot. I noticed a big change when I came to the States in 1969. Bruce seemed to be more humble. At that time in his life, he knew what he could do, so all the pretense and cockiness I saw in Hong Kong was gone. He was more a philosophical and

secure individual. I guess that was the new Bruce.

IKF: Going back a little, when did Bruce get involved with cha cha dancing?

RL: Bruce was about 17 and always chasing the girls, and the girls were always dancing cha cha at the nightclubs. As we know, Bruce could move pretty good and I guess the next step of things was to learn cha cha. At the beginning, Bruce did not know many steps in cha cha, but he compensated by knowing how to move well. At that time, Bruce used to go to a nightclub where the band members were all Filipino, and at that time the band members knew cha cha. From what I remember, the band members knew Bruce came a lot to the club and they all became friendly. After awhile they taught Bruce many different steps. That's how Bruce excelled in his dancing.

IKF: How did Bruce's leaving Hong Kong effect the family?

RL: As I remember, the whole family went to the dock where the ship was to depart and we all went up to his room where he began talking to my mother and father. I was still pretty young at that time and all I can remember was this huge ship and I was in awe. From what my mother had told me it was a somber time. She said when the

whistle blew for the ship to leave we all had to leave Bruce on the ship. As we walked on to the dock, we could see Bruce from the second story of the ship, waving a streamer, which they gave to all the passengers. He was waving to us and that was it.

IKF: I have had the privilege to see many rare notes from Bruce in your possession. Some of his notes document his complete trip to the States while on the ship. Tell us about some of those notes?

RL: Bruce's notes basically document his day-to-day life on the ship. His teaching of cha cha and meetings of different people. Bruce did write a lot about teaching cha cha and in return he would get better accommodations and upgrades. He really liked that.

IKF: When Bruce made it big with the "Green Hornet", how did your family react to his newfound fame in the states.

RL: At that time my father died, so he did not have a chance to see his son with that success. My mother, on the other hand, was very proud of Bruce, as were the rest of us. I can remember watching it on television and thinking cool, that's my brother. The family though was kind of used to his success

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Bruce – The Early Years

Continued from page 63

being a child actor. And all the people in Hong Kong already considered him a star from his early films.

IKF: Within five years after Bruce arrived stateside he was introduced to a lot of martial artists. Did Bruce ever tell you about them? Did he have a favorite?

RL: Bruce never discussed with me any of the martial artists he had met. He did tell me he really respected Muhammad Ali and thought he was a great fighter.

IKF: When Bruce had his success in *The Big Boss*, *Fist of Fury*, *Way of the Dragon*, etc., what was it like for your family?

RL: At that time my mother and myself were stateside. When the movies came to the theaters, we would go see them. It was amazing. I would forget sometimes he was my brother and just get involved with the film like everyone else. It was amazing just to see him move on film. I remember just being blown away hearing people scream

when Bruce made any type of fighting move. Man, he was the coolest. My mother couldn't get enough of the fans complimenting her son. I was very proud to be his brother.

IKF: If Bruce were to describe his films in a brief sentence, what do you think he would say? Starting with *The Big Boss*.

RL: Bruce would probably say it was a film I had to do to establish myself.

IKF: *Fist of Fury*?

RL: Bruce would say, I wanted to show the strength of the Chinese people.

IKF: *Way of the Dragon*?

RL: Bruce would say, I wanted to show my talents as a writer, producer and director and of course, acting.

IKF: Did he ever mention anything about his films, *Enter the Dragon* or *Game of Death*?

RL: Not really, he was in the process of working on both films. All I can say is, he felt *Enter the Dragon* was going to be big, and he was very happy with the way it was coming out.

IKF: I heard that Bruce was pretty

impressed with your music career. Was this true?

RL: Oh ya. I remember when I came over to the States, I brought singles that I recorded. I gave them to Bruce, and he would bring them over to James Coburn's house and they would listen to them. He would brag about me to his friends, and tell them how good of a musician I was. I remember one day I was playing my guitar in the living room, and Bruce approached and asked if it was hard to play the guitar. I told him not for me, and asked him if he would like me to show him a few chords. Well he sat down and for ten or 15 minutes he could not get it. He finally got up and walked away saying under his breath, "I will stick to martial arts."

IKF: Bruce had many friends and students. If I were to mention a few, what two words would describe them, from your conversations with Bruce?

RL: It would be hard to do it in just a few words, but I will try.

IKF: Danny Inosanto?

RL: True Friend.

IKF: Taky Kimura?
 RL: True friend.
 IKF: Herb Jackson?
 RL: Loyal and dedicated.
 IKF: James Coburn?
 RL: Philosophical.
 IKF: Ted Wong?
 RL: Good Friend.

IKF: Robert, I heard your son, Clarence, just signed a contract for film and music in Hong Kong. How does it feel that another generation of the Lee family is taking the show business path?

RL: I have always tried to instill in my son to be yourself, to express yourself truthfully. If I can show him and help him develop his skill as a performer, and help him somehow find himself in all of that, I will be a very happy father.

IKF: Is it true you will be re-recording the "Ballad of Bruce Lee", with your son in Hong Kong?

RL: Funny enough, he wants to do it with me with a few new tricks added in.

IKF: I had the privilege in meeting Clarence and was amazed in how much he looks liked a younger Bruce. Have you noticed any traits that your son has that remind you of Bruce?

"He felt *Enter the Dragon* was going to be big, and he was very happy with the way it was coming out."

RL: My son is still young and is still finding his true self. If you mean by him being very independent and a go-getter, yes those were traits Bruce had.

IKF: How does your son react knowing his uncle was the famous Bruce Lee?

RL: He has always been amazed that Bruce is considered his uncle. He has always been very proud of that fact. He just wishes that he could have met him. But my son understands, he really does.

IKF: Do you still write or record any music.

RL: I'm always fine-tuning my craft, and hopefully in the near future, I will be doing a few projects with my son.

IKF: I know you have been working on a few book projects, one about the Lee Family, and the other called *Thirty-Two Dragons*, which is a loving tribute to your brother. When are these due for release?

RL: If all goes well, yes, these projects should be released soon.

IKF: Finally Robert, to all the fans that can't ask you questions about Bruce and your family, what would you like to say to them?

RL: I would like to tell them on behalf of the Lee family, we thank all the fans an over the world for keeping Bruce's memory and vision alive. Bruce really wanted to please the world with his acting and martial arts, and I can see after 27 years he accomplished that goal. And I would also like to thank people like Danny Inosanto who stayed true to JKD and has helped it grow like Bruce would have wanted. And then there is Taky Kimura, who's loyalty and respect for Bruce can never be measured in words. 🐉

David Tadman is a Southern California-based martial artist and freelance writer.

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